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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: U.S.-EU AMBASSADORQ SHOW SUPPORT FOR CHURCH UNDER
GOB HARASSMENT

REF: A. MINSK 1143

[1](#)B. MINSK 1119

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ambassador and EU Heads of Mission recently visited the embattled New Life Church (NLC) to show their support for religious freedom in Belarus. The NLC ended its 23-day hunger strike on October 29 after the Supreme Economic Court agreed to review the church's appeal of the forced sale of their building and property. NLC Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko expressed his sincere gratitude for the support that the church has received from the diplomatic corps, as well as from Belarusian and foreign religious and civil society communities. He pledged to stand in solidarity against GOB repression with other civil society and human rights activists, forming the working group "Civic Council" as the first step to increasing the NLC's level of cooperation with other groups who struggle for freedom in Belarus. End summary.

Ambassador and EU HOMs Visit Embattled Protestant Church

[1](#)2. (U) On November 2, Ambassador and several EU Heads of Mission visited the Protestant New Life Church (NLC) to show their support for religious freedom in Belarus. NLC Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko thanked the ambassadors for coming and gave a tour of the building where the community worships. During the reception that followed, Ambassador told the independent press that the USG is well aware of the NLC's struggle and that she came to the church "to show support for Belarusians trying to assert their human rights." She stressed that freedom to worship is a basic human right that all countries, including Belarus and the United States, must uphold.

NLC, Hopeful for a Speedy Resolution, Ends Hunger Strike

[1](#)3. (U) At the urging of the Presidential Administration, the NLC filed an appeal on the forced sale of their building with the Supreme Economic Court (SEC) on October 18 (ref A). NLC lawyer Sergey Lukanin told Poloff on November 2 that the church expects that the SEC will make a decision by November 4 about the NLC's property and building. (Note: Post will follow up with the NLC following the SEC's decision and will report septel. End note.)

[1](#)4. (SBU) Upon learning that the SEC would review the NLC's case, the NLC concluded its 23-day hunger strike on October [1](#)29. According to Goncharenko, the SEC's decision to review

the NLC's appeal represents the first time a protest elicited a positive reaction from the GOB. Seven hunger strikers were hospitalized during the protest. Two hunger strikers remain in intensive care after having been diagnosed with serious illness and fatigue.

Religious and Civil Society Activists Form "Civic Council"

15. (U) On October 28, the NLC leaders together with approximately 60 civil society and human rights activists formed a working group entitled "Civic Council," which aims to pressure the GOB into respecting religious and other freedoms of its citizens. According to Goncharenko, the Civic Council has already composed letters to the mass media, heads of other religious communities and President Lukashenko asking for support for the NLC. The council also created a website -- www.post-golodovka.org -- to provide discussion forums, information, and updates on the NLC's situation.

Possible Alliance Between Religious and Other Activists?

16. (C) On October 31, Goncharenko told Poloffs that he hopes the creation of the Civic Council will lead to closer relations and better cooperation between the human rights activists and religious communities. He said that the NLC condemned GOB violations of religious freedoms in the past, but now the church plans to "widen its position" to include standing up for all freedoms of Belarusian citizens. Goncharenko considers the GOB's positive response to the NLC to be the first crack in the GOB's foundation and plans to do what he can to further undermine the GOB's repressive grip on Belarusian society. While hesitant to become overtly involved in politics for fear of GOB retribution on his church, Goncharenko told Poloffs that he is eager to

cooperate with civil society, religious and human rights activists. Poloff commented to Goncharenko that she was encouraged to see him exchanging information with Hare Krishna leader Sergey Malakhovskiy about their similar registration problems at Ambassador's October 13 breakfast (ref B).

NLC Building Defaced with Fascist Graffiti

17. (U) During the night of October 31 to November 1, unidentified supporters of the Russian extremist National Bolshevik Party (NBP) painted "No Totalitarian Sects!" and the NBP symbol on the outside wall of the NLC. The attack followed an article in the state newspaper "Vo Slavu Rodiny" describing the NLC as a totalitarian sect. In response, the BNP posted a statement on its website denying any involvement in the attack. Lukanin told Poloffs on November 2 that the police opened an investigation but do not have any suspects.

Comment

18. (C) The creation of the Civic Council represents the first known instance of active cooperation between religious groups and civil society and human rights activists on an organizational level. While some examples of the religious youth activists participating in flash mobs or demonstrations occurred in the past, the decisions to take part in those actions were made on an individual, rather than an organizational basis. It was also encouraging to hear that religious leaders have finally realized that they can make more progress in their struggle for freedom if they cooperate with activists and religious groups who have similar goals.

Stewart